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ABSTRACT

Most performer-writers accept the writing process simply as a means to an end: the shared performance event with a live audience. While writer-performers regard a script as more important than the performance, a solo performance is, however, a showcase of the artist's talent, and creating one's own text offers the performer artistic control. Some performers, such as Hal Holbrook and Emlyn Williams, adapt and reconstruct works by other writers into a new text. Lily Tomlin's collaboration with Jane Wagner recently produced the highly successful "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe." Monologist Ruth Draper performed purely oral performance texts for years (condensing, extending, or altering them according to the needs of a particular audience) before she finally wrote them down late in her lifetime. In such places as Colonial Williamsburg or Disneyland, the employees assume the role of fictional or historical characters, which is another way of combining writing with performing. Although considerable research is conducted for each character, the performers create their own dialogue through improvised interaction with each other and visiting tourists. The dual role of the performer-writer, which sometimes can result in internal conflict, is nonetheless challenging and rewarding. (Notes are attached.) (NKA)

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The Performer as Writer

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The Performer as Writer

John S. Gentile

When a writer-performer steps up to the lectern to read a poem or a short story, the audience is keenly aware of the artist's dual role. The reputation as a writer usually has precipitated our attendance while our own observation makes us aware of the assumed role as performer. Less aware are audiences of the dual role of performer-writers, artists recognized as performers who create their own performance texts. These artists' reputations are based on their work as performers; we know them as such and the performance event merely confirms in our mind their function as performers. Much easier, then, is it for an audience to be unaware of the dual role of the performer-writer, whose compositions may never be published except through the ephemeral performance act. Many

performer-writers are currently at work contributing to the cultural life of our country. This paper examines performer-writers and the variety of contributions made by these artists.

I

Whereas many writer-performers believe the performance aspect of their work is incidental, for most performer-writers the writing process is accepted simply as a means to and end: the shared performance event with a live audience. By extending the "pager-stager" terminology suggested by Katharyn Machan Aal,[1] we can develop a continuum which charts the movement of attitudes toward writing and performance:

High Value Placed on Writing	"The Pagers" (Writer-Performers)	"The Stagers" Those Artists Equally Valuing Writing and Performing (Writer-Performers or Performer-Writers)	"The On-Stagers" (Performer-Writers)	High Value Placed on Performing

Just as many writers are made uncomfortable by the word "performance" and prefer instead "reading," many performer-writers shun the word "reading" as an anathema. I've interviewed one performer-writer who explicitly renounces the term "reading" in his publicity material. The word "reading" obviously has just as negative connotations for some people--connotations such as pedantic, academic, dull, etc.--as "performance" has for others. As stated, for many performer-writers, the act of writing is simply a necessary step

to performing. The act of writing is clearly the writing of a performance text--a script--whether eventually published and silently read as literature or not, the text is intended as a performance phenomenon. Just as with a play, the solo performance text undergoes constant revision in rehearsal and in early performances with audiences. The written document--the text in print--then becomes an artifact; an artifact considered by the performer-writers to be inferior to the text in performance.

Many performer-writers do not cherish the act of writing, which for some becomes a dreaded task--the drudgery which precedes the real work of performing. Why, then, do performers choose to sit down alone and create a text? The immediate answer, like the kindred question asked by Katharyn Aal "Why do writers perform?," seems to be financial. Often actors turn to solo performance out of, as one director told me, "a bad economic situation and a faith in oneself." In such cases, the actor-turned-solo performer-writer writes a text in order to create not only a work but work--as in a job. Whoopi Goldberg was asked about her intentions for her 1985 Broadway show. She answered simply: "To get work. That was my biggest intention. [Laughs.] That show grew out of desperation."[2]

But just as the reasons behind a writer's willingness to perform are complex, so are those behind a performer's willingness to write. Certainly established performers do not need to write their own texts (and, in fact, many do seek out someone else to serve as "playwright"). But still other

performers would not consider using texts other than their own. Undoubtably part of the reason is the artistic control that creating one's own text offers the performer. A solo performance is, more than any other performance modality, a showcase of the artist's talent. Who is better equipped at composing a text to display the talent of the performer than the performer him or herself?

Not all performer-writers go about the business of creating a text in the same way. Some, like Emlyn Williams, Hal Holbrook, and Michael MacLiammour, are actually performer-adaptors. They adapt, edit, and reconstruct works by other writers into a new text. The performance texts created by performer-adaptors are not simply anthologies of another's work; the texts stand as unified dramatic wholes carefully orchestrated for maintaining audience interest and achieving the strongest possible theatrical effect.

Other peformer-writers work in collaboration with another person. Perhaps the best example of this kind of solo artist, the performer-collaborator, is Lily Tomlin whose collaboration with Jane Wagner recently produced the highly successful "The Search of Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe."

Still other performer-writers forgo any formal writing process in the strictest sense. These performers are, in effect, oral composers; their texts are orally created in performance. Ruth Draper is, of course, exemplary of this kind of performer-writer. Her character monologues, which were written down only late in her life, were purely oral texts which she would extend, condense, or alter in performance according to the

needs of a particular audience. In fact, Draper disliked and avoided performing texts which she had not authored. Henry James, in admiration of Draper's talents, wrote a monologue for her. Draper never performed it: "I think he was disappointed," she has been quoted as saying, "but I never learned it or tried it out on anyone."[3] Spalding Gray's autobiographical monologues are composed orally in performance. Gray does use notes to select monologues and jog his memory, but the texts are oral stories re-created for each performance. Another example of the performer-oral composer is Quentin Crisp who has toured this country with his lecture-entertainment for several years. Crisp does use anecdotes, themes, and witticisms from his published work--and therefore some people might argue that Crisp is not in the strictest sense an oral composer--but he has never written down a text adaptation. Instead, he prefers to spontaneously re-compose his performance text on stage.

The question still remains: why do performer-writers, whether we classify them as performer-adaptors, performer-collaborators, or performer-oral composers, create their own texts if the performance is the key phenomenon? When I spoke to Charles Busch, who has toured in his one-person show Cast of Thousands, he gave what well may be the best and truest answer. He said: that writing and performing his own texts "is the purest expression of my creativity."[4]

II

Thus far I have been speaking of solo performer-writers and referring specifically to well-known actors. Yet, I believe we need to recognize that performer-writers are not limited to solo art. Groups of performers also serve as their own writers. The best known performers of this kind are the players in comedy troupes and improvisational theatre. Yet group performer-writers work in a wide variety of theatrical events.

Although often overlooked as such, the employees of theme parks, restored villages, and other forms of tourist attractions, often are, in actuality, performer-writers. In such places as Disneyland or Disney World, Colonial Williamsburg, Plimoth Plantation, Old Sturbridge Village, Cowtown, Kansas, and Old Tuscon, Arizona, the employees assume the roles of fictional or historic characters. In many restored villages, the performers merely assume an historical type, such as an 18th century yeoman, but in others, such as Plimoth Plantation, the performer portrays an actual historical figure. At Plimoth Plantation, the performers are given a "Documentary Biograph" and a "Personation Biograph." The documentary biograph explains the known facts about the person to be portrayed, such as: his or her age in 1627, social status in Plimoth, place of origin, and parents. Some of this information is acknowledged as current opinion based on research but not established as yet as fact. The personation biograph includes dialect specimen, signature, names of friends, some suggested reading and various notes. The performer is then

responsible for further research and developing the character.

Although there is considerable research conducted for each character, there is little group rehearsal for the performers. Instead of a scripted drama, the performers create their own dialogue through improvised interaction with each other and the tourists who visit the Plantation. The performers are quite clearly, performer-writers or rather performer-oral composers who create their own texts each day. Speaking of Plimoth Plantation's use of "first-person interpretation" (i.e., employees assumption of historical characters), Richard Schechner comments in Between Theatre and Anthropology that:

> [T]he "first-person interpretation" technique has a kind of authenticity that the Plimoth architecture lacks. Nothing architectural survives from the original colony; the village has been totally recreated. But it is known who was there, and background information has been researched regarding individual inhabitants. Thus, while the buildings and furnishings are "typical" of the period, the people are "actually from" 1627--as much as good acting can make them so.[5]

While the players in comedy troupes, improvisational theatre, theme parks, and restored villages create their own texts orally, the work of group performer-writers is not limited to improvised scenes. Last year, I worked with the Wyoming Chautauqua with five other humanities scholars on the creation of a collaborative text which served as our script dealing with issues of the framing of the American Constitution. Each performer was responsible to research a selected figure of the Founding Period and to write his or her character dialogue. While a single playwright was responsible for the editing and structuring the

material into a dramatic form, the performer-writers were responsible for supplying the bulk of the script material. In fact, the arduous task of script development did not end once the research materials and character dialogues were collected and edited by the playwright. The weeks of rehearsal were vital in sharpening the text, which like any new script, needed to be mounted, to be "put on its feet," to allow the performers to re-write, revise, and agree upon a final draft. In looking back over my experience with the Wyoming Chautauqua, the work of the collaborative creative process of script development was the most significant challenge of the project.

III

What I've said here is simply a fragment of what deserves to be a much fuller treatment of the phenomenon of the performer as writer. Here I've only been able to glance at the attitudes of and motivations for performers who create their own texts. Whether the performer-writer is a performer-adaptor, performer-collaborator or performer-oral composer, the work is both challenging and rewarding. Whether the performer-writer works alone or within an ensemble, the dual role can result in the artist's internal conflict or what the New York Times refers to in a discussion of performer-writer Eric Bogosian as "a constant tug-of-war."[6] When speaking of his own experience as a performer and writer of his critically acclaimed solo show "Drinking in America," Bogosian himself said, "The actor in me

just wants to entertain. He hears people laughing and would keep ad libbing if left alone. The writer has a point in mind that he wants to make and he's damned if he's going to let the actor screw it up."[7]

NOTES

[1]Kathryn Machan Aal, "The Writer as Performer." Dr. Aal presented her paper on the same program at SCA, 16 Nov. 1986. "The Writer as Performer" and "The Performer as Writer" were subsequently published together in the American Institute of Discussion Review 3.1 (1987): 21-37.

[2]Jill Kearney, "Whoopi Goldberg: Color Her Anything," American film, Dec. 1985: 26.

[3]Morton Dauwen Zabel, The Art of Ruth Draper (London: Oxford Univ. Press), p. 52. Henry James' monologue appears in The Complete Plays of Henry James, ed. Leon Edel (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1949).

[4]Charles Busch, personal interview, 1 Oct. 1982.

[5]Richard Schechner, Between Theatre and Anthropology (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) p. 88.

[6]Enid Nemy, "Broadway," New York Times, 14 Feb. 1986: 2.

[7]Nemy.